Simply Better!

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Customers in Focus

A Guide to Conducting and Planning Focus Groups

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Preface

This guide to planning and conducting focus groups is based on materials developed by Technical Assistance and Training Corporation (TATC) under contract to the U.S. Department of Labor's Training and Development Center. **Simply Better!** wishes to acknowledge the efforts of TATC's staff, particularly Vina Alcantara, Marsi Fein, Michael Kirsch, and Bernadette Odyniec. We also wish to thank Lu Acosta for her assistance in making the dissemination of this guide possible.

Introduction

Providing high–quality customer service has become one of the most important themes in American industry today. In an increasingly competitive marketplace firms understand they cannot become—or remain—successful if they do not provide the best possible customer service. In the manufacturing sector, producers have learned it is no longer sufficient to produce a high–quality, low–cost product. Buyers want customization, convenience, timeliness and personalized attention. The renewed emphasis on customer service is even more pronounced in service industries. This is quite understandable, because for these businesses the service *is* the product being sold.

The lessons of the "quality revolution" in the private sector are gradually being applied in the public and non–profit sectors as well. Concepts like the customer–focused organization, continuous improvement and employee involvement are taking root across all levels of government—federal, state, and local. The nation's employment and training community is no exception. At its core, employment and training is a *service* business. As such, a strong customer focus is critical to its success.

In the past, many of us in the employment and training community violated a central tenet of customer service—we assumed we "knew" what our customers thought, what they wanted, and what they needed. Furthermore, customers were perceived to be *external* to the organization, rather than an essential part of it. In their book *Winning the Service Game*, Benjamin Schneider and David E. Bowen state that one of the most important principles in providing service quality is to "never divorce the customer from thoughts about what a service business really is or how it should be managed. Customers are *part* of your firm."

In order to truly make customers a part of your organization, you have to be willing to learn from them. In the jargon of total quality management this is known as "listening to the voice of the customer." *Reinventing Government*, by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, identifies well over a dozen ways to solicit customer feedback, including surveys, customer interviews, customer councils, suggestion boxes, complaint tracking systems and focus groups, the subject of this publication.

Project Coordinator
Frank Wilson

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

What are Focus Groups?[1]

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain a selected group of individuals' perceptions regarding a defined area of interest.

This chapter will help you understand:

- **What a focus group is and is not.**
- **The appropriate uses of a focus group.**
- **The distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research.**

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF A FOCUS GROUP

• Focus Groups Involve People

Focus groups are typically comprised of six to twelve people—large enough for everyone to exchange ideas and opinions, but small enough for everyone to participate in the discussion. Participants are selected based on common demographic characteristics or experiences. They share something that directly relates to the topic being studied, and are usually somewhat familiar with the topic.

• Focus Groups Are Conducted In Series

Multiple focus groups are held to draw out patterns. This is important because multiple sessions increase the reliability of the results. The more complex the issue, the more focus groups you need to schedule. However, after a certain point, additional sessions become redundant and add little unique information.

• Focus Groups Are A Data Collection Procedure

Focus groups are held to learn about why and how a particular group of people approach an issue. They are frequently used to evaluate a program or policy or to understand product marketing.

Focus groups yield information about the perspective of a target group—how it perceives, feels, and thinks about a specific product, service, or opportunity. They are *not* intended to reach consensus or decide on potential courses of action.

• **Focus Groups Have a Focused Discussion**[2]

Focus groups are led by a moderator who seeks to create a non–threatening environment for all participants. The topics are predetermined and organized prior to the session. The moderator uses a detailed discussion guide of open–ended questions that follow a logical sequence. This discussion guide addresses topics and specific questions relating to the purpose of the focus group. In general, participants have little input into its content. Discussions typically run from ninety minutes to two 1/2 hours. Responses and observations are recorded on the spot.

A Focus Group Is *Not* :

- A brainstorming session designed to enhance creativity by generating a range of ideas.
- A team building session intended to increase productivity and improve relationships.
- A project team meeting designed to accomplish specific tasks, provide updates and respond to opportunities within the work place.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Advantages of Focus Groups

- Increase “face validity” (apparent validity) because the data collection process places a premium on individual contributions.
- Provide an economical data collection option, depending on the number of groups conducted and locations selected.
- Capture a wider range of responses than individual interviews.
- Reveal insights and nuances that other research methods, such as surveys, usually cannot.

Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Present a logistical challenge—coordinating different schedules of participants, selecting an accessible site, and choosing a site conducive to open discussion.
- Require a skilled moderator able to encourage participants to express their views and still keep the discussion on track.
- Have less control over data collection because participants shape the discussion.

Qualitative And Quantitative Research Methods

Focus groups are a tool often used in "qualitative" research, research that does not use statistical methods as the primary means to gather and sort information. Instead of the numbers used in quantitative research, qualitative research is marked by observations—words which describe the issue in question.

Ideally, you will be able to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to learn more about the topic in which you are interested. For example, many people combine surveys and focus groups to learn more about an issue.

Neither method is inherently superior. Quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and are each suited to answer different types of questions. The table on the next page will help you determine which research approach will best meet your needs.

You may be asked about the "validity" of qualitative research methods such as focus groups. (In this case, validity refers to whether or not the focus group data describes what it intended to.) People may ask how you make inferences from data that are non–numerical. You can answer such questions by:

- Increasing the confidence in your focus group data by selecting a topic or issue which is well–suited to a focus group;
- Following certain protocols—procedures for every phase of focus groups—described in Chapters 1–5.

Comparing Qualitative And Quantitative Research Methods

ELEMENTS	QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Purpose	To describe a situation, gain insight into a particular practice, belief, etc.	To predict something to reveal the prevalence–how widespread is something?–of a practice, belief, etc.
Format	No predetermined response categories (e.g.: question could ask "how satisfied are you with XYZ program?").	Standardized measures, response categories pre determined and pre supplied (e.g.: responses could range from "not at all satisfied" to "completely satisfied").
Resulting Data	In-depth explanatory data from a small, representative segment of the population.	Wide breadth of data from a large, statistically representative segment of the population.
Limitations	Complicates the issues; cannot generalize results to larger population.	Simplifies the issues; can generalize results to larger population.
Framework	Draws out patterns from concepts and insights.	Tests a hypothesis, uses data to support a conclusion. May use a control group.
Process	Illustrative explanation and individual responses.	Numerical aggregation in the form of percentages, tables, etc. Responses are clustered.
Approach	Subjective.	Objective.
Analysis	Interpretative--how and why.	Statistical--what and how many.
Analytical Strength	"Face" validity--the results usually look valid.	Statistical reliability.
Methods	Varied formats for group and individual interviews; direct observation.	Standardized interviews, surveys, regression analysis.

When to Use and When Not to Use Focus Groups

The decision whether to use focus groups depends on:

- The purpose of the study.
- The questions being asked.
- The type of data needed.
- Resource availability (time and cost).

Use Focus Groups To:

- Understand how people *feel* and *think* about a program, service or issue.
- Test an exploratory design as a preliminary study.

Do Not Use Focus Groups:

- To obtain statistical projections.
- To resolve an issue that needs another type of organizational intervention (e.g., teambuilding, conflict resolution).
- When confidentiality of information sources cannot be maintained.

CHAPTER 2

FOCUS GROUP DESIGN— OBJECTIVES & WRITING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

How to Get Answers to Your Questions

Your first step in conducting focus group research is to determine what you want to achieve with the information collected from the focus group.

This chapter will help you understand the first two steps in focus group design:

- **How to identify the objectives of your focus group.**
- **How to write discussion questions that will give you the data you need to meet the focus group objectives.**

Determining Focus Group Objectives

Step 1. Answering Essential Questions About Your Focus Group

Even if the topic of the focus group has been assigned to you, it is still necessary to refine the subject matter by coming up with specific objectives. Before you write the questions you will ask participants in your focus group, ask yourself:

- What is the specific purpose of the focus group?
- What information am I seeking?
- What is the problem or issue being investigated?
- What is the context of the focus group?
- Who wants the information?
- How will the focus group data be used?
- Is the focus group one of several ways data are being gathered or is it the sole source of data collection for the particular issue?

Step 2. Consider Focus Group Composition

Selecting participants for the focus group usually occurs after you have completed the discussion guide, or while you are writing it. But before proceeding to write the questions, ask yourself:

- What is my "target audience" for the focus group?

Target audience refers to the people who will best be able to answer your questions—the ideal focus group participants. If you cannot reach these people you will need to rethink your questions. (See Chapter 3 for more information on participant selection.)

Step 3. List the Focus Group Objectives

Don't have more than three main objectives for your focus group. (Although you may have more sub–objectives.) If you come up with more than three key goals, you will have problems getting the information you need because you will have packed too many questions into the discussion.

Be clear on the objectives and answers to Steps 1 and 2 before you proceed with focus group design. Conceptual clarity at this early stage will make for easier writing of questions and will help you at all points in the focus group process, including data analysis.

Review your objectives with key players in the focus group process.
Make sure everyone is comfortable with how you have defined the purpose of the discussion.

Preparing A Discussion Guide

• Preparing a discussion guide is a critical step in planning to conduct a focus group. The moderator uses the discussion guide to control the flow of questions during the focus group session.

• The focus group objectives drive the content of the discussion guide. Using the guidelines in this module, write questions that, when responded to by focus group participants, will answer your overall questions and meet your focus group objectives.

• A discussion guide usually contains between nine and, at most, 12 questions. The moderator may write margin notes in the guide to help her through each stage of the discussion. A discussion guide should not exceed two pages.

• The questions in the discussion guide are usually followed by "probes," between one and five bulleted points beneath the question that allow further investigation of the particular question.

• The discussion guide only asks questions that are directly related to the focus group objectives. It does not veer off, for instance, and ask personal questions which may be only slightly related to the purpose of the discussion. It is inappropriate to ask participants to supply information that is peripheral to the focus group objectives, particularly if it is of a personal nature.

• To see a sample discussion guide, refer to Appendix 1.

Focus Group Stages[3]

Before your write the discussion guide, it is helpful to have a sense of the structure and flow of a focus group.

Focus groups move through four stages:

Introduction

↓

Transition

↓

In–Depth Investigation

↓

Closure

The moderator and the discussion guide should be sensitive to this rhythm of focus groups. However, transition from one stage to another should be smooth. Participants should not notice an abrupt move from one stage to the next.

Stage 1. Introduction

Purpose

- To establish rapport with the participants by getting a sense of their concerns about the nature and structure of the discussion.
- To establish a high–energy yet comfortable environment so participants are comfortable disclosing opinions and feelings.
- To provide information on what to expect during the session.

Stage 2. Transition

Purpose

- To obtain a snapshot of the participants' overall perceptions or views about the topic.
- To set the stage for an in–depth discussion. These questions move the discussion into the next stage, which is the in–depth investigation.

Stage 3. In–Depth Investigation

Purpose

- To generate detailed, substantive information about participants' views toward the most important issues in the discussion guide—the ones that relate to the core purpose of the focus group.
- To enable participants to elaborate on responses about the topic.

Stage 4. Closure

Purpose

- To create an opportunity for participants to alter or clarify positions they have made in earlier discussions.

- To verify conclusions drawn across topics.

- If necessary, to prepare participants for the discussion's end. This is usually done when the subject matter is highly personal or elicits strong emotions.

- To thank participants for attending the session; to acknowledge the experiences and views of participants as valid and enlightening; and to remind participants why their advice was important.

- To handle final logistical matters.

Types of Questions

Open–Ended Questions

Definition: Questions which do not fix attention on any specific factor. They allow respondents to structure an answer along any of several dimensions and encourage an expansive reply. Usually, they begin with when, what, where, who, or how.

Most of the questions in the discussion guide will be open–ended.

Examples:

- "What do you think are the biggest problems facing employers today?"

- "What was your overall impression when you first walked in the One Stop Center?"

Benefits:

- Can provide a substantial amount of information because the interviewee is not bound to a limited answer.

- Reveal what is truly on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind.

- Especially useful at the beginning of the focus group.

Drawback:

- Can result in lengthy replies, which may make it more difficult to control the focus group.

Dichotomous Questions

Definition: Questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no," or some variation, such as "yeah" and "I guess so."

Limit your use of dichotomous questions to the end of the discussion, when you want to wrap up the discussion and bring focus to responses.

Examples:

- "Is the parking at the One Stop Center adequate?"

- "Were you treated courteously during your last office visit?"

Benefits:

- Can be used to discourage someone from monopolizing the discussion.

- Can confirm or clarify a point.

Drawbacks:

- Limit conversation.

- Can elicit ambiguous responses.

Specific Questions

Definition: Questions that require a precise reply.

Examples:

- “How long did the assessment process take?”
- “How many times did you meet with your case manager last month?”

Benefits:

- Can confirm or clarify a point.
- Are useful in controlling the interview.
- Are usually preferred toward the latter parts of the focus group as the moderator narrows the range of inquiry.

Drawback:

- Limits conversation.

Probing Questions

Definition: Probes reveal more in–depth information by clarifying earlier responses or expanding on previous statements by a participant. They ensure that “data gaps” do not occur. Probes can also test the strength of someone’s opinion and encourage dissenters to speak up.

Effective probing is a critical task for the moderator. Good probing generates conversation by focusing attention on the response rather than on individuals. Probes may be open–ended or closed–ended, but are usually open–ended.

Examples:

- “What specifically could be done to overcome that?”
- “What is it about ________ that causes you to feel that way?”
- Help me understand...
- How so?
- In what way?

- What else?
- Anything else?
- How does that ______ apply to you?...to others?
- What does “(Descriptive word)” mean for you?
- How would you describe the feeling/thought...to someone who didn’t know (from another agency, another user)?
- Please tell me more about...
- Please give me an example of...
- What can someone else tell me about this?
- What ideas/reactions have I/we missed?...not heard yet?
- Can someone help (Name) out?
- When was the last time you saw/felt/thought...
- Does anyone feel differently about this issue?
- What’s the “good news/bad news” about this issue?

Questions to Avoid Using

Double–barreled Questions

These require two sets of responses. For example, *“How do you feel about the requirement and what are you going to do about it?”* or, *“How do you feel about the timeliness and flexibility of _____?”*

“Why” Questions

“Why” questions turn people off because:

- “Why?” has only one answer form—”Because,” which restricts the range of answers.

- “Why?” may sound attacking, like an interrogation, so the reply is often defensive.

- “Why?” puts people on the spot, making them feel as if they have to think of a plausible reason at once.

- “Why?” can be very personal, touchy, inflammatory and just plain rude—not eliciting, encouraging, or inviting.

- “Why?” is loaded with associations—whining kids, accusing parents, judging teachers.

- “Why?” invites rational thinking or responses that seem appropriate to the situation rather than emotional or spontaneous responses.

Dichotomous Questions

Because these questions tend to limit the discussion, they should be used only sparingly.

Leading Questions

All questions should convey the least amount of information about the moderator’s (or the question writer’s) personal expectations or opinions. A leading question has the answer already embedded in the question. For example: “*Why do you think Congress never seems to allocate enough funds for the* _____________ *Agency to do its job effectively?*”

There is a way to ask participants how they would solve a problem without asking a leading question:

- The moderator first asks the question in a very general, open–ended manner. Responses will usually be based on participants’ most recent experiences or opinions. The moderator should not initially supply examples of ways to solve the particular problem in question. Doing so might limit the discussion.

• Next, the moderator offers "cues" about alternative possibilities when the discussion lags. These cues are written as probes under the question in the discussion.

Questions About the Future

Responses about events that have not occurred are speculative and cannot be considered reliable. There is too much uncertainty with a hypothetical question.

Questions That Set Up a "Pecking Order"

It is particularly important in the beginning of the focus group not to ask questions that establish a hierarchy of status among the participants, such as income or education levels. Also avoid questions that create a hierarchy of expertise on the topic at issue. For example: *"How many training courses or computer programs has each of you designed?"*

Steps for Writing Focus Group Questions

Step 1. Create an outline of topics to discuss.

Limit the list to six to 10 issues.

Step 2. Begin drafting the questions.

• Write questions that will generate the maximum amount of information from the participants.

• There are usually two to five key questions to be asked in the in–depth stage of the discussion. Write these questions first. (These questions will require the most attention in analysis.)

Step 3. After writing the questions, take a break and return to them in a day or two.

Good focus group questions result from lots of reflection, fine–tuning, and re–writing.

Evaluate your questions with this checklist:

- What type of language does the topic and target audience require? Do you want to use words that "experts" use? Do you want to use the vernacular?
- Is the language informal and simple?
- Are questions short and understandable? Many words have multiple meanings.
- What information does the question ask for?
- How broad or narrow is the question?
- How is it related to what I need to know?
- How "answerable" is it?
- How are participants likely to feel about it?
- How would I feel about this question?
- Is the question too sensitive?
- Is the context of the question clear? For example, does it indicate whether the question is about something current or in the past? For example, "Thinking back three months ago,...."

Step 4. Sequence the questions in logical order.

Start off with the general topic and then move on into more specific areas. Think about when you want to open up the discussion.

Step 5. Get feedback on the discussion guide.

Turn to colleagues for advice and, if you have access to them, experts in the field who work with (or are) members of your target audience.

Step 6. Pilot test your questioning route.

This will allow you to see how your target audience responds to how you have structured the questions. If you can't convene an actual focus group, gather members of your target group together for a group interview.

Data gaps often result from poorly written questions. Doing a pilot test will significantly improve the quality of your data.

Step 7. Revisit your discussion guide.

Based on your assessment of the pilot focus group and advice of colleagues, edit the discussion guide accordingly.

Writing the Discussion Guide and Focus Group Discussion Stages

When writing the focus group questions, consider the activities that should occur in each stage:

Stage 1. Introduction

- Moderator introduction and quick overview of background.

- Moderator explains purpose of session and states focus group sponsor, participant selection criteria, and how information will be used. This overview anticipates questions about what to expect and the agenda.

- Moderator is forthright when presenting this information without revealing too much about assumptions and purpose of discussion. Doing so might lead participants to supply answers in reaction to purpose of the research.

• Moderator carefully manages expectations of participants. If, for example, advice is being sought about how to improve a particular program, participants should be told that information they supply may not necessarily be adopted by the program's managers.

• Moderator informs participants the session is going to be audio–taped (if appropriate). This is both an ethical and legal requirement.

• Moderator presents "ground rules" for discussion (see Appendix 4 for sample ground rules).

• To initiate discussion, moderator uses an icebreaker to increase the participants' comfort level, build rapport between moderator and participants and among participants, and energize the group. The icebreaker is an opening question which helps participants see their commonalities and identify other participants.

• Participants introduce themselves by name and say how their backgrounds tie in with the purpose of the focus group. For example, "How long have you lived in _____?" or "How long have you been employed by XYZ?"

• Avoid "infinite" questions as openers. For example: "Tell us something about yourself" or "Say anything you'd like the group to hear—you have 2 minutes." You end up either losing control to opinionated participants or intimidating the less talkative participants.

• Moderator begins substantive discussion with a general question to introduce the topic.

Stage 2. Transition Stage

• Moderator asks substantive questions that transition to the key questions.

• Participants should sense a logical link between the introductory questions and the transition questions. Likewise, there should not be an abrupt plunge into the key questions.

• During transition, participants become aware of the opinions and feelings of other participants.

Stage 3. In–Depth Investigation

• Moderator moves into concrete discussion of issues. Highlights individual differences by helping participants reveal their beliefs, attitudes and feelings.

• Moderator keeps "probing," asks follow–up questions to clarify and expand on responses. Narrows down the topic. Asks specific questions and pursues related issues when a given topic elicits an emotional response from participants.

• Moderator relates to key points from earlier discussion to make a smooth transition across a series of topics.

• Moderator adapts discussion guide to related issues which she anticipated would arise.

Stage 4. Closure

• Moderator raises the key issues discussed by briefly summarizing the main points of view and asking if this perception is accurate. Links key issues and opinions from each stage of the discussion.

• Moderator concludes focus group with clarity. Invites comments, amendments or corrections on wrap–up/summary. Allows participants to clarify earlier responses. The goal is to get participants' final positions on the key issues. Moderator may still have to sort out and identify disparate attitudes, especially areas that were brushed aside by the participants.

• Moderator asks participants if there are any other issues they want to discuss. Asks "clean–up" question, *e.g.*, "Have we missed anything?" Or, "Given that we've talked about XYZ for a while, what questions do you have about it?"

• Only at the very end of the discussion should the moderator solicit feedback on how the focus group was conducted.

CHAPTER 3

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE FOCUS GROUP?

IDENTIFYING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE FOCUS GROUP?

Reaching the Focus Group Target Audience

Identifying and selecting appropriate participants is a very important aspect of conducting focus group research. If your groups are not representative of the target audience, your data will not help you understand the issues in which you are interested.

This chapter will help you:

- **Determine "selection criteria" for the focus group.**
- **Recruit members of the target audience to participate in the focus group.**

Group Composition Guidelines[4]

Whom To Invite To Participate in the Focus Group

No matter what type of people you identify to participate in the session, try to follow these general rules:

Focus groups are composed of six–12 persons who are reasonably:

• **Homogeneous**.

Participants have similar backgrounds and demographic characteristics in relation to the topic. This common ground increases the participants' comfort level and allows them to actively participate.

Even though focus groups are largely homogenous, the participants should have one or two key characteristics that make them different from each other. These few distinctions should relate to the purpose of the group. For example, perhaps you want to explore the relationship between length of employment and views toward customer service. In this case, your focus group participants would be largely homogeneous except for the variation in number of years participants have worked for the organization in question.

• **Reflective of the target audience for the focus group**

Participants should be representative of the larger group to which you want to generalize—the "target audience." Think of these standard demographic characteristics—how should the group look along lines of:

- Age;
- Education;
- Income/class;
- Occupation;
- Race/ethnicity
- Religion;
- Region/area of residence;
- Gender.

If the target audience consists of no women, for example, then it is appropriate to include only men in the focus group. If the target audience is a mix of white and Latino males, it is important that the focus group reflect that mix.

Do not, however, put together a group where one or a handful of people find themselves in the minority. For example, even if females are a minority of your target audience, make sure your focus group includes about four women.

• Unfamiliar with each other.

People who regularly interact either socially or at work may respond more on the basis of past experiences, events or discussions than on the immediate topic of concern. Moreover, familiarity (particularly between friends and family members) tends to inhibit disclosure.

There are exceptions to this general rule. In some cases, the focus group objectives will demand familiarity among participants. When participants are familiar with each other, make sure you do not group together individuals with explicit or implicit power over others in the group (*e.g.*, supervisors and front–line staff; grantees and contract officers, etc).

In establishing your selection criteria, remember to always think back to your target audience and the key objectives. Are the people you have identified as potential participants reasonably reflective of the target audience? Can they provide you with the perspectives you need to answer the key focus group objectives?

Whom *Not* To Invite To Participate in the Focus Group

Do *not* invite:

• **Veteran focus group participants**.

You may not want to invite anyone who has ever participated in a focus group. You do not want participants who may "game" the focus group moderator and are used to being asked their opinion.

• **People who are all likely to agree with each other.**

Without creating a heterogenous group, try to include some participants who are likely to oppose some of your assumptions about the subject matter—people who are likely to disagree.

EXAMPLES OF DO'S AND DON'TS
IN ASSIGNING PARTICIPANTS TO FOCUS GROUPS

DO **ASSIGN TO THE SAME GROUP**	***DON'T*** **ASSIGN TO THE SAME GROUP**
Members of different work groups who perform the same functions	Members of the *same* work group whether or not they perform the same functions
Supervisors from various parts of the organization	Supervisors *and* their employees
Users of the same product or service	Service or product providers *and* their customers
Individuals with the same level of proficiency	Individuals with *different* levels of proficiency or experts and non-experts
Individuals from different organizations who share a common interest in the topic	Users *and* nonusers of a product or service

Recruiting Focus Group Participants

Step 1. Develop a list of potential participants.

In identifying potential participants you need to be sure that the focus group members are truly reflective of the target group. Bias can creep in—or be blatantly inserted—throughout the focus group process. To prevent this, you need to be alert to this possibility during every phase of your work.

Bias in recruitment is called "selection bias." One potential cause of selection bias is from explicitly or implicitly recruiting individuals who are likely to confirm your assumptions about the issue(s). Recruitment should proceed so there is an equal likelihood your assumptions about the topic will be refuted as they will be confirmed.

As you proceed through Step 1, you may find that is difficult to directly access the potential focus group participants you are seeking. These individuals might not have home telephones or they might have relocated to a different part of the country. Perhaps you need to contact an employer or supervisor to obtain permission for the individual to participate.

If this is the case, you may need to go through an intermediary party with greater access to the potential participants or more control over their schedules. In such cases, try to follow the strategies listed below:

• Budget more time for focus group recruitment and site selection.

• Try to retain as much control over the selection process as possible.

• Minimize the role and influence of intermediary parties in all phases of focus group planning, conduct, and analysis. However, also try to take advantage of their resources. For example, they may be able to give you a computer list of potential participants.

• Be clear to all parties involved—yourself, potential participants, the intermediary organization—who plays what role. For example, give the intermediary party doing the recruiting a list of recruitment pointers. This list should state the sponsor of the discussion. (The intermediary party should explain they are not sponsoring the discussion and will not have access to any of the focus group data.)

• Develop a selection protocol consisting of explicit directions for recruitment. Give this to the intermediary party.

• Try to randomly select participants from the universe of your target audience.

Step 2. Using your selection criteria, create a "screener" to select participants.

This could be a script you administer over the telephone or in person. (As a last resort, the intermediary party can administer the screener.) The script is actually a brief questionnaire—no more than two pages—containing basic questions you ask of participants to determine whether they meet focus group criteria.

Step 3. Recruit focus group participants using the screener and, if necessary, intermediary party.

Be sure to "over recruit" focus group participants. It's likely some people will not show up. It's a good idea to recruit 14 people per focus group. If more than 12 people show up, compensate the last two individuals who show up by paying them not to attend the discussion.

Step 4. Once you have selected participants, communicate with them prior to the focus group.

This may be done by mail, telephone or through a colleague. The purpose of this communication is to confirm their attendance and the focus group logistics.

In your communications with participants, briefly convey the purpose of the session without betraying too much about the nature of the focus group discussion. Be consistent in all your communications with the participants—tell them all the same thing.

CHAPTER 4

CONDUCTING AND OBSERVING THE FOCUS GROUP

Conducting and Observing the Focus Group

Putting It All Together

Several elements are still required for the focus group to be successful.

This chapter will help you:

- **Address the logistical issues associated with planning and conducting a focus group.**
- **Understand the traits of a good focus group moderator.**
- **Select an appropriate moderator.**
- **Become an astute observer of the focus group you plan.**

Logistics

Selecting a Facility

When selecting a facility, remember this acronym: ***C.A.N.***

*C*omfortable

- Select a room that is comfortable for participants. Make sure that the furniture is adequate—participants will be sitting for a long period of time.

- The room should have adequate lighting, heating and ventilation.

- Make sure the room can accommodate the invited number of participants and observers.

*A*ccessible

The facility should be readily accessible and in a relatively convenient location for participants. It should also be able to accommodate individuals with disabilities (*e.g.*, have ramps, elevators, sufficient space in the room for a wheelchair).

*N*eutral

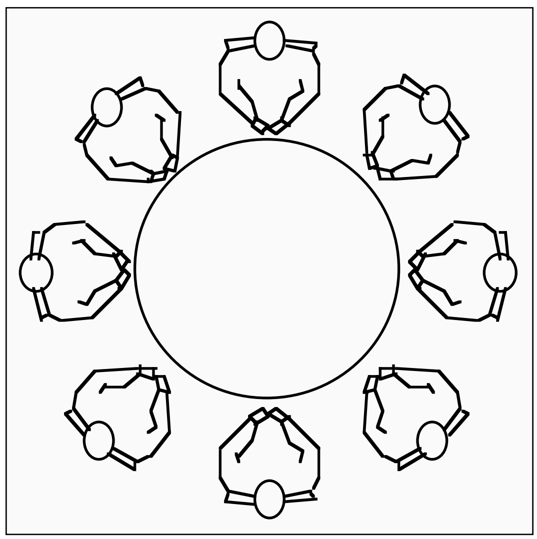
Choose a “neutral” setting for open discussions. If the topic is confidential, this precaution reduces the anxiety level of the participants. More importantly, you want to reduce the possibility of somebody overhearing the discussions.

Setting Up the Room

- Arrange the seats in a circular or U–shape so that everyone faces each other throughout the discussion.
- Arrive early for the session to make sure the room has been set up according to specifications.

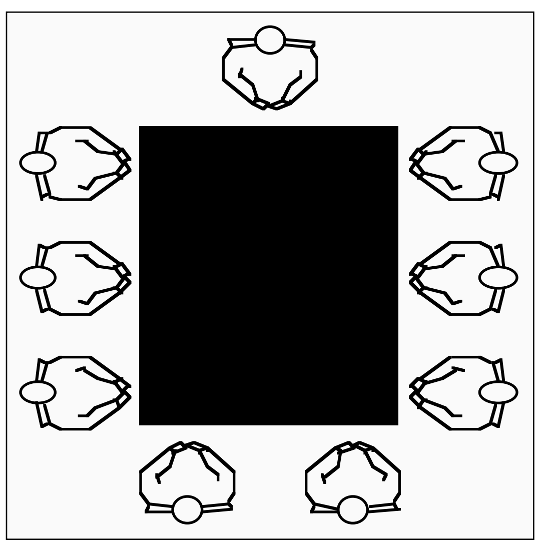
Moderator

Circular Arrangement



Moderator

U-Shaped Arrangement



Expecting the Unexpected[5]

No focus group proceeds exactly as planned. Below are a few things which may go wrong, and some suggested solutions:

- **Nobody shows up.** Review your letter of invitation to make sure you are in the right place at the right time. Call a few of the participants to see if they are coming to the session. Make sure your list includes the telephone numbers of each participant.

- **Only a few participants attend.** Conduct the session after making sure that there will be no latecomers.

- **The meeting place is inadequate.** Check the room set–up ahead of time. Improvise, where possible, to meet your needs.

Cost

The costs associated with conducting a focus group can vary widely. Variables might include whether participants are paid, whether a site must be rented, whether a paid moderator is used, whether professional transcribers are hired, etc. Sometimes even trying to identify participants can result in incurred costs. The “average” taxpayer, for example, probably cannot be identified without the help of an expensive market research firm.

Focus group participants are often paid for participating. Payment can range from $10 to a high of $75 or more. Whether you choose to pay participants, and how much you pay them, depends on the nature of the discussion, who participates, and any other relevant factors. If participants must take time off from work or travel a significant distance, they are more likely to require some form of payment.

If paying participants in cash is too expensive, try to come up with creative forms of compensation. Perhaps your organization can obtain discounted tickets for movies, concerts or local sporting events.

Assessing Moderator Competencies

The type of moderator needed for your focus group will depend on the nature of the discussion. General rules to follow when selecting a moderator:

Moderators Should *Not* Be:

- Somebody the participants know well, if at all.[6]
- Identified with the organization (if any) from which participants are drawn or any controversial issue.
- Someone with real or perceived power over the participants (*e.g.*, hiring, firing, etc.).
- Someone who is personally involved in the outcomes of the group.

Effective Moderators:

Sometimes possess certain personal characteristics. For example, do certain characteristics of focus group participants—race, class, foreign language ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.—direct you to a certain type of moderator?

In some cases, full participation in the discussion and disclosure is enhanced by a moderator who shares something with the participants, such as personal experience with the discussion topic.

Depending on the nature of your focus group(s), you may seek to hire an outside moderator or you may use an "in–house" resource. In either case, the following table will prove useful when you are evaluating the competencies of potential moderators.

ASSESSING A MODERATOR'S COMPETENCIES

ANALYTICAL THINKING, PREPARATION, & BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	*PLACE A CHECK IN THE APPROPRIATE BOX* **EXCELLENT** Able to do this easily	**GOOD** Able to do with some effort	**FAIR** Able to do with coaching and substantial practice
Sees patterns across responses - identifies themes and relates key points to the "big picture."	❑	❑	❑
Places comments in perspective and follows–up on critical areas. Knows "devil's advocate" positions; is familiar with all sides of an issue so can challenge participants when necessary.	❑	❑	❑
Familiar with the discussion guide. Moves easily between different sections of the questioning route. Doesn't miss key questions. Glances at the guide but doesn't read questions.	❑	❑	❑
If participants are from an organization and/or a different community, moderator understands issues unique to that organization or community and relates focus group questions to local and organizational issues.	❑	❑	❑
Reviews list of participants. Knows focus group composition before it begins.	❑	❑	❑
Focuses complete attention on the group conversation.	❑	❑	❑
Deftly handles participants who are:[7]			
Experts. Underscores that everyone is an expert and all participants have important perceptions that need to be expressed.	❑	❑	❑
Dominant Talkers. Avoids eye contact with and turns slightly away from a dominant talker. Tactfully shifts discussion (*e.g.*: "Thank you John. That's one point of view. Does anyone have another point of view?")	❑	❑	❑
Ramblers. When a rambling respondent dominates the discussion, asks the next question or repeats current question when rambler pauses. If necessary, interrupts the rambler, breaks off eye–contact, and asks other participants questions. Doesn't let situation drag on.	❑	❑	❑
Shy. Maximizes eye contact with shy participant. As a last resort, calls on the shy participant by name and offers them the opportunity to speak. Is kind and doesn't put the person on the spot. For example: *"Mary, do you have anything you'd like to add here?"*	❑	❑	❑
Able to pace questions so not caught short of time. Controls discussion.	❑	❑	❑
Able to listen to participants. Doesn't talk unnecessarily.	❑	❑	❑

GROUP DYNAMICS AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

GROUP DYNAMICS AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	*PLACE A CHECK IN THE APPROPRIATE BOX* EXCELLENT Able to do this easily	GOOD Able to do with some effort	FAIR Able to do with coaching and substantial practice
Listens well: clarifies key points by paraphrasing participants' feelings and opinions.	❏	❏	❏
Applies a combination of questioning techniques to obtain in– depth and clear responses.	❏	❏	❏
Pauses briefly after a participant comment (this often prompts additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position).	❏	❏	❏
Doesn't move from topic to topic too quickly.	❏	❏	❏
Probes for additional information when participants make vague comments that could have multiple meanings.	❏	❏	❏
Asks questions clearly and precisely; rephrases questions if original wording is unclear; uses simple language.	❏	❏	❏
Enthusiastic and interested in topic.	❏	❏	❏
Actively engages participants in the discussion.	❏	❏	❏
Creates trustful atmosphere.	❏	❏	❏
Friendly and has a sense of humor.	❏	❏	❏
Encourages expression of divergent viewpoints:			
After several echoes of the same idea, asks "Does anyone see it differently?" or "Are there any other points of view?" (The discussion should not be free of conflict.) Contrasts opposing opinions without embarrassing participants.	❏	❏	❏
Demonstrates respect for individual experiences.	❏	❏	❏
Responds to participant comments in a neutral manner:			
Withholding personal opinions.	❏	❏	❏
Non–verbally (uses head nodding only to elicit additional comments, such as a single nod to a person who seeks to talk, because it can signal agreement and as a result, tends to elicit additional comments of the same type).	❏	❏	❏
Verbally (says "okay," "yes," or "uh huh" and avoids "correct," "that's good," or "excellent," because they imply judgements about the quality of the comment).	❏	❏	❏

Observing the Focus Group

Substance of Observation

Analysis of focus group data begins with observation of the discussion. The observer's principle role, therefore, is to take notes during the focus group discussion. This is necessary even if you plan to record the session on audio tape.

Generally only one—and no more than two—recorder(s) should be present. Additional observers can inhibit the discussion. Observers/recorders should *never* participate in the session.

Tips for Observation and Note–Taking

- **Before the Session**

  - Prepare note–taking forms in advance. Fill out the appropriate information: name of the moderator, date, location, and group.

  - Thoroughly review the discussion guide in order to reacquaint yourself with the questions.

- **During the Session**

  - Use a tape recorder to capture the discussion. This is necessary if you plan on transcribing the session. Inform participants of this arrangement before conducting the session.

  - As soon as participants begin to sit down, make a seating chart. This will help you keep track of the discussion. Later on, it will help you link comments with names and faces and identify who said what if you are transcribing audio tapes.

  - Write legibly.

- Organize notes around each question. Often, participants talk about issues that are scheduled for later discussion. Refer to off–shoot discussions that take place along the way. Don't screen out comments that seem important. Note diversions, clarifications of final opinions and shifts of opinion.

- Capture the main points and examples. In general, do not take verbatim notes or note who said what. The tape recorder will capture the details. Your role is to record key points and bits of quotes that you would like to return to later on.

- If conducting multiple focus groups, record all responses across different sessions. There is a tendency to omit comments that were raised in earlier sessions.

- **After the Session**

  - Review the notes after each session. Debrief with the moderator using the Debriefing Form contained in the Appendix.

  - If you need typed notes, type them within one week so as not to lose valuable information. Notes and recollections tend to get muddled, especially if you are conducting a series of focus groups.

10 Questions Effective Observers Ask Themselves

1. **What are the areas of disagreement and consensus, and their depth?**

   What unites the group? Are there points of ambivalence? Why might someone be undecided or torn over an issue? What would cause them to be more decisive?

2. **Where are the consistencies and contradictions?**

   Do participants' initial statements match those at the end? If not, how do they reconcile differences? What accounts for the change of view?

3. **What is the language of participants?**

   How do participants talk about an issue? Are the questions relevant to the participants? Do they make sense to them? Do these match those used by the moderator? What terms resonate with participants?

4. **How do participants interact with each other and the moderator?**

   Do they defer to the moderator or each other excessively? Are they respectful of each other? Bear in mind the distinctions, however slight, among participants. Do opinions fall neatly along such distinctions?

5. **What emotions surface in the discussion?**

   How strongly are they felt? Do deeply held feelings change under certain conditions?

6. **What does the body language of participants reveal about their response to the subject matter?**

   What body language is displayed? Are participants engaged, indifferent, etc.?

7. **Is there an unspoken, underlying story?**

   Do participants seem to be holding back on supplying information? Is something else going on that participants hint at, verbally and non– verbally?

8. Does an obstacle reveal something about the issue?

For example, does a roadblock—the group does not want to talk—reveal something about the subject matter? Is the topic highly sensitive? Why doesn’t the topic provoke discussion? Is a logistical problem—too many people talking at once—preventing a clear discussion?

9. Are your hearing all you that you need to understand the issue?

Listen and think simultaneously.

10. Are you maintaining a past–present–future perspective throughout the discussion?

Keep in mind what has been discussed, what is currently taking place, the next topic of discussion, and what it will all mean when it is concluded.

CHAPTER 5

GETTING ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS – ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP DATA

Getting Answers to Your Questions

The Final Stage

Analysis of the data you have collected is the culminating activity of the focus group process.

This chapter will help you:

- **Analyze focus group data to answer the focus group objectives.**
- **Present focus group results in a variety of formats.**

Analyzing Focus Group Results

An Analytic Strategy for Qualitative Data

Qualitative data are messy. The data—words—are voluminous and cannot be easily manipulated. Yet, there are ways around this. This module describes a systematic, verifiable approach that can be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time.

Develop an analytic strategy that works for *you*. Consider your resources of time and money, your organization's investment in the issue studied, implications of focus group results, the role of the focus groups in a larger study, etc.

When thinking about how to analyze the data, give some thought to how you will present it. If you need to write a report describing the focus group findings, you can begin to write it while analyzing the data.

Purpose of Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to:

- Answer your research question(s);
- Challenge your research assumptions.

Who Analyzes Focus Group Data

You will probably be the principle data analyst. This makes sense, as you probably wrote the focus group guide and observed the discussions.

It is advisable to work with at least one colleague, the moderator of the discussion, an outside expert or others. The purpose of this is to let at least one person challenge your conclusions and verify the analysis.

Verification is important because it safeguards the integrity of the analysis.
It is accomplished by collecting sufficient evidence to support your conclusions, and organizing that evidence in a systematic fashion. This allows for similar conclusions to be drawn by other researchers using the same raw data.[8]

When To Conduct Analysis

Beginning analysis immediately after the focus group is held will enhance its quality. This is particularly important if you plan multiple focus groups held in different locales. Analyzing the raw data shortly after each focus group will prevent you from confusing different sessions and will guard against a fading memory. Your immediate hunches and impressions of a focus group can be lost—and are not captured in a transcript—if you delay analysis.

How to Conduct Analysis

Step 1. Organize the data.

To organize focus group data, turn to:

- Audio tapes of the focus group. (Listening to audio tapes is highly labor intensive. Decide if you need to listen to entire discussions a second time.)
- Background material about the issue being addressed.
- Notes taken during focus group(s) by the observer.
- Focus group debriefing forms completed by observer and moderator.
- Focus group discussion guide.
- Focus group participant evaluation forms.
- Focus group objective(s).
- Transcripts of audio tapes. (Transcribing focus group proceedings is not always feasible. Sound analysis can be conducted without transcripts.)

Step 2. Categorize the focus group findings by coding the data.

There are several ways to do this:

- Label the observer notes and quotes from transcripts with the question number(s) to which the note or response pertains.

- Alternately, you can look for themes, trends or ideas in the data which may or may not coincide with the questions asked. Develop a simple code (colored brackets or abbreviations) for each theme. Write the code next to each note or response which echoes the particular theme.

Pointers for Coding Data

- There are a number of ways any set of data can be organized. The challenge is to come up with the most useful approach, considering your purpose and the people to whom you are reporting the data.

- Do not create too many codes or your data will be confusing. Modify these categories of “recurring themes” or patterns as you go along but be consistent in your use of codes. Test to see if each category still holds.

- The appropriate code is not always obvious. It is critical to challenge your assumptions and those of colleagues assisting you by discussing classification of data, particularly where a certain classification would confirm your assumptions.

- Review the purpose of the focus group. Data that do not relate to a discussion question, the focus group objectives or discussion theme do not need to be classified. Discussion questions are not equal; focus your analysis on key questions.

- Whichever classification system you use, keep an eye out for quotes suitable for the report.

- As you code the data, refer to *10 Questions Effective Observers Ask Themselves*, at the end of Chapter 4.

Step 3. Interpret the data.

You are now ready to make an explicit link between the coded data and the focus group objectives and assumptions. To do this, develop a framework to relate the categories of data to one another. Richard A. Krueger suggests asking these questions:

- "What was known and then confirmed or challenged" by the focus group data?
- "What was suspected and then confirmed or challenged" by the focus group data?
- "What was new that wasn't previously suspected?"

When answering these questions, it is critical to:

- Be open to alternative explanations about the data, particularly if the data confirms your assumptions.
- Accept whatever the data reveal, even if it is discomfiting to the institution sponsoring the focus group or clashes with your original research assumptions.

Presenting Focus Group Data

Decide how you need to present the information. Most likely it will be in the form of a report. A formal, lengthy report is usually not necessary but a written record is critical for internal use and if the findings will be distributed to a large audience. Often a short narrative and a bulleted summary of the key findings is more useful.

If you need to write a report, use this section as a guide.

Step 1. Define the Purpose of the Report

The type of report you write depends on the purpose of the study and how the results will be used. The primary purpose is to communicate the focus group findings.

If there are secondary and tertiary purposes—and there usually are—identify them before you communicate the focus group results.

Step 2. Identify Your Audience

Are you writing for a group of experts well–versed in the subject matter explored in the focus group? Or, is your report geared to a user of a certain system, someone who does not speak the language of experts but is personally acquainted with the subject?

Obviously, you can't predict your entire audience but you should direct your writing to certain groups of people. This simplifies report writing; it dictates the language you will use, the length of the report, the format, and the content.

Step 3. Choose the Type of Report

There are three types of reports for focus groups:

- Written reports.
- Oral reports.
- A combination of both written and oral reports.

Step 4. Develop a Structure for the Report

Develop an outline of your report in terms of chapters and sections. (If you need to write an in–depth report, try the format on the next page.)

Decide on the level of detail and the type of information your audience needs—a full, in–depth report or a short, summary report?

Determine the writing style. For example, should it be a descriptive style, an analytical style, a story–telling style, or some combination of these approaches? How formal or informal should the language be?

SAMPLE REPORT FORMAT

I. Executive Summary of Major Findings

II. Introduction/Overview of the Project

A. Purpose of the project.
B. Context for project: why were focus groups conducted?
C. Expected outcomes from the project.

III. Methodology

A. Description of the data collection approach.
B. Number of sites (list of locations if not confidential) and dates of sessions.
C. Description of participants.
- How participants were selected and recruited.
- If focus groups varied, describe variation.
- Number of participants/sessions/locations.
- Demographic and other characteristics of participants.
- Analysis Approach.
- Statement of limitations of data collection and analytic approach.

IV. Main Findings/Detailed Findings

V. Conclusions and Implications of Data For Decision–Making or Policy–Making

VI. Recommendations

VII. Appendix

A. Data tables.
B. Focus group questioning guide.
C. Endnotes and references.

When writing reports, remember the following helpful points:

- Be as concise as possible. Write from the premise that "less is more."

- Use verbatim participant comments to illustrate points, but do not saturate the report with them unless requested to do so. The language participants use will bring your issue to life. You can insert their comments in the narrative and create sidebars or boxes containing quotes.

- Adhere to the parameters of confidentiality you followed while holding the focus groups. Remember not to reveal identifying information about focus group participants in the report. Instead, give participants skeletal descriptions (*e.g.*, "African American females participating in the Title III program").

- Write the executive summary last. You will get a sense of the "whole picture" at the end of report writing. It is then easier to summarize the findings.

- Follow standard writing procedures—use the active voice and an engaging, informal writing style.

Step 4. Verifying the Assumptions in the Report: The Feedback Process

Share draft copies of the report with colleagues who have helped you with the analysis and focus group design. If you have been working alone, get at least one other person to read a draft of the report. This will help ensure that the document is coherent and flows logically. It is also necessary to help verify the data.

You should also share the draft report with individuals who played a key role in helping you set up the group. For example, if a nonprofit agency gave you access to its clients you would want to share the report with its executive director. If you have access to the focus group participants and they are willing to read the report, you may want to share the draft with them. If these individuals feel the report misrepresents their comments, you may wish to consider whether it is appropriate to make revisions addressing their concerns.

Presenting the Results Orally

An oral presentation is not a condensed version of your written report. Take a different approach from the written report.

- Determine the purpose of the oral presentation.

- Size up your audience; why should they should care about the focus group findings? How much time do they have for the presentation? What will your audience do with the information?

- Are these senior executives who will make policy? If so, spare them the methodological details and after a brief introduction, dive right into the key findings and recommendations. Save less important issues for last, if you discuss them at all.

- If you are presenting to a larger research team you will probably need to discuss the methodology in some detail.

- Follow standard procedures for making effective presentations.

- Do not overwhelm your audience with key points—seven is a good upper limit.

- Engage your audience at the very beginning of the presentation. One way to do this is by asking a rhetorical question and referring to issues that are important to your audience.

- Prepare visual aids such as transparencies, hand–outs, flip charts or slides with back–up data to support key points.

- Do not go overboard on visual aids and stick to one medium. You want your audience to spend most of their time looking at you, not a flip chart.

- Allow the audience to ask follow–up questions. Indeed, you should not spend more than 20 minutes talking. The bulk of the presentation should consist of discussion.

APPENDICES

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Sample Discussion Guide

[Note: the main purpose of this focus group was to solicit information about employee involvement.]

Icebreaker: what kind of work do you do for _________ ?

1. **How do you feel about [_________] agency?**
   - What is your opinion about the service it provides? [quality, staff]
   - What do people you talk to say about this agency?
   - What do their friends and family think about the agency?

2. **How do you participate in decisions about work?**
   - Thinking about giving input to people in [________] through —— ——, how does that make you feel about this agency?

3. **What are your feelings about being involved in decisions about work?**
   - Employee interest in being involved in range of decisions related to work.
   - If interested, why do they think their involvement matters?
   - If not interested, why not?

4. **What do you think of other employees representing your needs and interests before agency staff?**
   - Do you think that not everyone needs to participate in decisions?

5. **Thinking about your experience participating in decisions at this agency, do any problems come up when participating in decisions?**
   - What obstacles do you have to overcome to have your opinion heard? (If none are mentioned, describe some obstacles: lack of time, not enough support for participation, interpersonal issues.)
   - Do you face any resistance to participation by anybody? If yes, where does it come from? Why?

- Probe race and class issues, here or in next question. Say it's okay to discuss these issues.
- Given the different problems you mentioned, what do you think should be done to improve things? For example, do you need certain skills and ongoing support to participate?

6. When you think about participating in _______, how do you feel about what's going on?

- Employee opinion about form the participation takes. Is it satisfactory or could it be improved?
- What do you think about the way in which your input is sought? Of the manner in which opportunities to participate are publicized? How helpful are the staff in explaining and facilitating participation?

7. When does the agency seek your input?

- Is it more important to give your opinion at certain times (or does it not matter when you participate in decisions?)?

8. When you talk with senior staff about work, what are you most interested in telling them?

- Probe for opinions about the quality of the worklife, feelings about how employees are treated.

9. Has your involvement in [_________] agency decisions about the [_________] affected your overall feelings about working here?

- How does involvement affect how you feel about being an employee of this agency?

10. Is there a downside to providing input? Are there times when you don't want to participate in decisions?

- Does it complicate things?

11. You've told me that you give input to X. How do you want them to use it? What do you expect them to do with the input you provide?

- Expectations about the agency's responsibility to adopt input.

Appendix 2. Sample Focus Group Debriefing Form

The moderator and observer each use this form to assess each focus group immediately after it ends and participants have left. Tape record the debriefing.

Your Name____

Your Role ____ Observer ___ Moderator

Date of focus group

Time focus group began_________________________________

Time focus group ended_________________________________

Type of focus group (important if conducting a series of focus groups with different types of participants)

____

____

Location of focus group _______________________________

Number of focus group participants_____________________

Name of organization from which participants are drawn

____

1. What are the highlights of this focus group? (Were there any surprises and/or confirmation of assumptions?)

2. Describe the three toughest situations the moderator encountered. What could have made them easier?

3. Did the group maintain a strong discussion on the issues throughout the session or did it meander? If so, where did it meander?

4. Characterize the nature of this group.

5. Did the discussion guide adequately assist the moderator in getting through questions? If not, what additional questions and techniques did the moderator use to foster a fuller discussion?

6. Did the topic seem to motivate the discussion?

7. What issues did the group respond to most energetically?

8. What issues and techniques didn't resonate?

9. How does this focus group compare with previous discussions?

10. Were the objectives of this focus group met? If not, how can they be met in future focus groups?

11. Were the meeting environment and room adequate?

12. Compare your responses to those of the moderator or observer. What are the areas of agreement and disagreement?

Put this form in the envelope for this focus group, which includes the observer's notes, demographic and comment forms, payment information, list of attenders, and audio tapes.

Appendix 3. Post-Discussion Comment Sheet

We greatly appreciate your participation in this discussion. Please take the last few minutes to complete this form and turn it into the meeting facilitator ***before*** you leave. Your opinions and feelings provide us with important information about this discussion and will help us in the future. Thank you.

How long have you been employed by XX? _________

Are there any feelings or opinions you have that you didn't share during the discussion that we should know? Please describe in as much detail as possible. (If you would rather tell the moderator instead of writing, please do so now.)

Any comments about the discussion itself and/or the moderator?

For moderator's use only:

Date of focus group____________________________________

Location____

Agency/Group____

Appendix 4. Sample Ground Rules

Sample Ground Rules

- Everyone participates; give priority to those who have not spoken.
- Speak briefly and often. Please, no speeches.
- Be open and honest.
- Be specific and talk about your own experiences.
- Listen without interruption.
- It is okay to present problems—but focus on solutions.
- It is okay to disagree—do not be disagreeable.
- There are no right or wrong answers; all responses are valued.

Appendix 5. Suggested Readings

Albrecht, Terrance L. "Understanding Communication Process in Focus Groups.' In David L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*." California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1993.

Krueger, Richard A. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, Second Edition*. California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994.

Lazarfeld, Paul. *The Art of Asking Why*. New York: The Advertising Research Foundation, 1986.

Merton, Robert K., Fiske, Marjorie, and Kendall, Patricia L. *The Focused Interview, Second Edition*. Illinois: The Free Press, 1990.

Morgan, David L. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. California, Sage Publications, Inc., 1988.

Patton, Michael Q. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1990.

Stewart, D.W. & P.N. Shamdasani, P.N. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1990.

Strauss, Anselm, and Corbin, J. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory and Procedures and Techniques*. California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1990.

Zemke, Ron and Kramlinger, Thomas. *Figuring Things Out: A Trainer's Guide to Needs and Task Analysis*. USA: Addison–Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987.

Appendix 6. Footnotes

[1] Adapted from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (California: Sage Publications, 1994).

[2] Most focus groups are highly structured discussions, but there are variations on this. Refer to the literature in the Appendix for further information.

[3] Adapted from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide or Applied Research* (California: Sage Publications, 1994).

[4] Adapted from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (California: Sage Publications, 1994).

[5] Adapted from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (California: Sage Publications, 1994).

[6] There are exceptions to this. In some groups, some familiarity between the moderators and participants may foster a more productive discussion.

[7] Participant types described in Krueger, *op. cit.*, pp.117-118.

[8] Adapted from Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (California: Sage Publications, 1994).

About SIMPLY BETTER!

Simply Better! is an initiative of employment and training professionals and agencies committed to continuously improving the quality of their services and their performance by uncovering and acting on what satisfies their primary customers – jobseekers and employers. Organizations currently affiliated with **Simply Better!** include Private Industry Councils, employment and training service providers, state and local governments, and the US Department of Labor.

In addition to *Customers in Focus*, the **Simply Better!** project has produced and is producing the following publications:

- A *Self-Assessment System* for employment and training program operators. This package of materials incorporates principles from the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award and other such programs tailored to the needs of the employment and training system. The materials lead the user through a self-examination of seven key areas of organizational management including leadership, strategic planning, human resource development, operational analysis and customer satisfaction, and provides agencies with a well defined picture of their strengths and need for improvement.

- *Service by Design* This guide to improving service delivery takes quality improvement processes that have proven effective in the private sector and translates them into an employment and training context. By following a six step process for analyzing program operations, users will be able to improve the quality of front-line transactions – the points of contact between agency staff and the customer.

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- *Case Studies in Quality*   This ongoing series will explore real life examples of providers that have improved the quality of their services by adopting principles of continuous improvement and putting the customer first.

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To learn more about **Simply Better!** products, services and affiliates, call your Regional Office of the Employment and Training Administration and ask to speak with the **Simply Better!** representative or call:

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